

# JACOB LEISLER, THE AMERICAN ROBESPIERRE

**CHOLERIC German Who Seized the Government of Colonial New York and Ruled for Two Years with an Iron Hand • A Reign of Terror That Ended Only When He and His Chief Lieutenant Died on the Scaffold, the Only Cases of Capital Punishment for Political Offenses in the History of New York.**

BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

Robespierre was a fanatic. So was Joseph Leisler. The Frenchman was scholarly, refined in speech and almost ascetic. His German-American prototype was rude, coarse in tongue and of violent temper. Robespierre, while abhorring blood, sent thousands to the guillotine. Leisler, with little compunction about blood letting, was responsible for great misery, but few deaths. Both acted under the guise of law. Both died on the scaffold. The world never will forget Robespierre and the Reign of Terror. Comparatively few persons know of Jacob Leisler and his Reign of Terror. He antedated Robespierre by a century and he appeared upon a much smaller stage, but while he lasted he was as big a figure relatively in the New World as Robespierre was in the Old. It was in the spring of 1689, when Leisler was in his fiftieth year, that he began to play his great role. He was born in Germany and came to New York in 1680. He had married a widow, a niece of Anneke Jans, and through her could claim relationship to many of the leading Dutch families. He had followed the sea for a time, and once he and his ship had been captured in the Mediterranean and held by the Turks for ransom. He had prospered as a merchant and was one of the solid, substantial citizens of the city, when, in the turmoil that followed the flight of James II. and the accession of William and Mary, he plunged into the political affairs of colonial New York.

It was an age of bigotry and intolerance. Men were judged more by their religion than their merits. Leisler's father, a clergyman, had been persecuted and driven out of Germany because of his Protestantism, and the son held all followers of the Catholic faith responsible for what his father had suffered. He had a strong, but distorted, sense of honor. For the English he had little regard. He gloried in the Dutch republic, and he would have been happy if such a republic were established in America. In conversation he was loud and coarse, and he swore like the proverbial pirate, but in church he prayed longer and more vigorously than any one else. He had little education and no manners, but he had a slight knowledge of law and could make a rousing speech. Although he was vain and boastful, he had a fair amount of safety. There was no question as to his courage. He was strong in his hates and strong in his likes. Frequently he was intemperate in his speech and said bitter things which he did not mean and which he soon forgot, but which others neither forgot nor forgave.

New York presented just the opportunity for such a rash, forceful, assertive man. On December 11, 1688, King James had fled from London, and on February 13, 1689, William and Mary had been proclaimed King and Queen. The convulsion that followed in England had its reflex in America. King James less than a year before had sent Sir Edmund Andros to America as Governor and had consolidated all the colonies under the name of New England. Nothing could have been more unpopular. Each Colony was jealous of the other, and the consolidation only inflamed the prejudice against the King.

Governor Andros was in Maine on an expedition against the Indians when the first report reached him, William as King was the next best thing to the establishment of a Dutch republic in America, for it meant that a



Dutch King had become an English King. He hurried to New York, thrilled with the feeling that momentous events were impending. They were, and he was to be the chief agent in their making. Governor Andros had left Lieutenant-Governor Nicholson in charge of the Colony of New York, and Nicholson had as his Council, Frederick Philipse, Stevanus Van Cortlandt and Nicholas Bayard. There was no complaint of misrule against Nicholson. He was straightforward and honest. He was a devout Episcopalian, but having been appointed by King James, that was sufficient to make Leisler eager to oppose him.

The opportunity soon developed. On April 22 a cargo of livestock came consigned to Leisler. He refused to pay the duty, on the ground that Collector Ploverman, being a Catholic, was disqualified from receiving the customs of a Protestant King. At once he became a popular hero. He had defied the Governor and Council. Others quickly followed his example and refused to pay duties or taxes. Nicholson attempted to enforce the laws, but Leisler soon aroused the passions of the people. It was an era of superstition, fear, intrigue and double dealing. To raise the cry of Popery was sufficient to incite the multitude.

Nicholson was attacked. Might he not be working secretly for King James? Leisler and others told how Nicholson had knelt when James was said in the King's tent three years before on Houslow Heath. Men became pallid when they heard this awful story.

Next there was a wild alarm about a mighty army of the French King was sending over with King James at the head, to America. Sentinels were stationed at Coney Island to report as soon as the fleet was sighted, and the militia of the city, consisting of six companies, was called out for service in the fort and work was started feverishly to put the city in position for defense. Of this militia Nicholas Bayard was colonel, and of the six companies the captains were Abraham de Peyster, Johannes de Bruyn, Gabriel Miravella, Charles Lodwyck, Nicholas Stuyvesant, and last but not least, Jacob Leisler. There was a dispute about one of the militiamen acting as sentinel in place of a regular soldier and the lieutenant who assigned the militiamen was reprimanded by the Lieutenant-Governor. The lieutenant answered angrily and Nicholson exclaimed that he would rather see the city afire than have it commanded by such a man. Before sunrise next day the incident had been exaggerated to absurd limits. The Lieutenant-Governor had planned to burn the city and

massacre all the Dutch. Former Governor Dongan was in the plot, too. Later in the day drums began to beat, workmen left their shops and a mob gathered. The town was in panic. Leisler addressed the mob and that evening sent a formal demand to Nicholson for the keys of the fort. When Nicholson declined Leisler sent a militia company to enforce the demand. Thereupon Nicholson surrendered the keys.

Some of the militia captains began to feel timorous. Four of them—De Peyster, Stuyvesant, Minville and De Bruyn—requested Colonel Bayard to take the reins of government. He declined. He believed a little time would bring the people to their senses. He, Van Cortlandt and Philipse went among the people and tried to calm their fears about Nicholson. But Leisler turned on them and denounced them as rogues and papists working for King James, and such was the blinding fury of the crowd the three men really were suspected. On May 31 Leisler had drawn up a "declaration," which all the captains had signed, declaring the city was threatened by Nicholson and pledging to hold the fort until proper authorities should arrive.

King William had been too busy with the involved affairs of England to give attention to the colonies, which he thought needed little notice, but he issued a proclamation continuing in office all Protestant officials in the colonies. This had been sent to Governor Andros in Boston, and he, being in jail, it had not been sent to New York. Had it been forwarded promptly Jacob Leisler probably never would have taken an oath of loyalty and obedience to the King and Jacob Leisler. When Captain De Peyster and Lodwyck warned Leisler against such an oath he dismissed them from the service. When Bayard arrived Leisler sent soldiers to arrest him. The house where the dying boy was lying was searched from cellar to garret, and then the houses of Mayor Van Cortlandt, Peter Stuyvesant, Dominie Selys and sixteen other prominent citizens were ransacked. Many of the soldiers were drunk and there was a hunt for a man conducted in a more shameless manner. The day after this search Stuyvesant resigned as captain of the militia. There now remained only one other than Leisler of the six in charge when the body was summoned for duty.

**Slaughter.** A year had elapsed since James had been driven from the throne. Nicholson had arrived in England and had reported. The address from Leisler had been received. The ministry was in possession of both sides of the story, and the King had appointed Colonel Henry Sloughter Governor of New York and Nicholson had been appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Virginia. Sloughter might have proceeded at once to America, but King James was raising an army in Ireland, and King William needed all his ships to transport the troops that were to battle with the former sovereign. Leisler meanwhile revived the customs and excise duties of James II. the same duties he had been the first to resist. There was an outburst of rage at this. His proclamation was torn down, and when it was reposted it again was torn down. Several persons were cast into prison on suspicion of thus offending Leisler. Furious at the conduct of the people, Leisler went beyond all bounds to

for help. This was delightful for Leisler. He responded with four cannon, and soon after sent three sloops with armed men to take charge of the fort at Albany.

The Albanians saw in this an attempt to seize their government. They refused to accept the reinforcements unless they were subordinate to Albany authorities. Mayor Peter Schuyler was put in command of the fort, and when Jacob Milborne, who was in charge of the three sloops, demanded admission to the fort it was refused. Milborne endeavored to win the people over to Leisler, and succeeded in getting 100 to join him. With these and his force of New Yorkers he marched to the fort next day, and after again demanding admission attempted to force an entrance. A party of Mohawks took position on a nearby hill and sent word to Schuyler, for whom they had great respect, that they would attack the New Yorkers upon word from him. Milborne, after one more demand, withdrew. Governor Treat sent eighty-seven soldiers from Connecticut to aid Schuyler, and this completed Leisler's discomfiture.

Bayard, who had been living in Albany, wrote to New York asking for protection. He was about to return. His only son was dying. Leisler, smarting under the failure of Milborne's expedition, called a public meeting when he heard of Bayard's intention, and declared Bayard was advancing on New York with 300 men and that former Governor Dongan was to assist him in capturing the city. Thereupon he called on all the people to take an oath of loyalty and obedience to the King and Jacob Leisler.

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Leisler treated the deputies with scant courtesy. He called a convention to select a committee of safety, and this committee appointed him captain of the fort and later commander of the province. When a copy of this proclamation was received by Mary King and Queen was received from Hartford he got hold of it, had it read at the fort, and then, summoning Mayor Van Cortlandt, ordered him to read it at the City Hall in Coenties Slip.

An Cortlandt resenting Leisler's dictation, told him to have it read by the clerk, who read it at the fort. Whereupon Leisler denounced him as a papist, and the crowd shrieked, "Down with the traitor!" Van Cortlandt was roughly handled, one of his party was felled with a musket, the sheriff was kicked and beaten and others only escaped by running.

Two days later the proclamation of the King continuing all Protestants in office was received and posted by the council. To comply with it the council removed Collector Ploverman and appointed four commissioners as temporary collectors. Leisler ignored the proclamation, and when Bayard attempted to sustain the collectors, he was threatened with death and had to flee to Albany, where Philip Schuyler and Robert Livingston gave refuge to him.

Leisler now was in the saddle in earnest. All who did not recognize his authority he denounced as papists. To deny the charge was equivalent almost to a confession of guilt. Travelers were arrested on suspicion that they might be in league with those opposed to him. All letters were seized by him and read for fear that they might contain treasonable matter. He might contain treasonable matter. He might contain treasonable matter. He might contain treasonable matter.

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was ordered to try the prisoners. Bayard and Van Cortlandt prepared the evidence. The trial began March 30. The indictment charged murder and treason "for holding the King's fort by force against the King's Governor . . . and in the reducing of which lives had been lost." Eight of the prisoners pleaded not guilty. Leisler and Milborne refused to plead.

After eight days' trial the jury found Leisler, Milborne, Dr. Gerardus Beekman, Johannes Vermilye, Thomas Williams, Myndert Coerten and Abraham Brusher guilty. De Lanoy and Edsall were acquitted. Sentence of death was pronounced on the eight.

The prisoners begged for a reprieve until they could petition the King. Sloughter granted it, and recommended pardon for all, but Leisler and Milborne, whom no greater villains lived, he said. William declared the trial just.

Sloughter was flooded with petitions for mercy. He was beset, too, with petitions for carrying out the sentence. He was weak and intemperate. On May 15 he signed the death warrant of Leisler and Milborne. It is said he was in liquor when he did it. If he was he did not alter his mind regarding the prisoners in the next two days. On Saturday, May 17, Leisler and Milborne were taken to a gallows near where the giant skyscraper known as the Park Row Building now stands. It was a dark, rainy, melancholy day, but a great mob had gathered. Milborne was on the verge of collapse. He started a pathetic address, but seeing Robert Livingston in the crowd, he cried: "You have caused my death. Before God's tribunal I will impeach you." Leisler made a short speech and then said a prayer.

The drop fell; there was a wall of anguish, and then barbaric shouts of execution, and the Robespierres of America and his chief lieutenant were dead, the only two men ever executed in New York for a political crime. (Copyright, 1910, by Richard Spillane.)

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